

**AGRARIAN REFORM AND CHANGE**  
**IN**  
**INDIA**

**G. P. MISHRA**

**GIRI INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**  
**B-42, NIRALA NAGAR, LUCKNOW 226007**

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Giri Institute of Development Studies  
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## AGRARIAN REFORM AND CHANGE IN INDIA

Agrarian reform is some kind of specific institutional reform brought about the State in rural India. The main idea behind the State initiated and introduced reform is to evolve a new form of agrarian relations for speeding the tempo of rural development and for widely diffusing its benefits among all sections of the rural population, particularly among the weaker sections, in rural areas so that the socio-economic lot of the rural poor improves and the existing gap between the rich and poor gets abridged. In view of the above idea, there is need for evaluating the role of agrarian reform in changing the existing agrarian relations into the new ones which are urgently required for shaping the socially desired speed and spread of rural development in the country.

## II

As sequence to the above issue at a point, it is pertinent to know some of the basic elements that agrarian relations embrace and to see as to how agrarian reform has taken them with a view to changing the given agrarian relations in rural India.

Agrarian relations represent an area of social life deeply rooted in the history of rural India, for that matter in mankind's history. "In essence they embrace four basic elements : (a) the land question - a question of one of the main sources of livelihood and people's lives; (b) the question of its producers - the peasants who represent the most numerous section of the popula-



tion; (c) the question of agriculture, i.e., technology and methods of farming; and (d) the social question, that is to say, the relationship between rural and urban producers, town and countryside, agriculture and industry".<sup>1</sup> These four basic elements of agrarian relations necessitate the importance and significance of agrarian reform is assuming the play of its role in encompassing their all basic elements, if the objective of the reform is to mould the given agrarian relations into new ones for shaping the socially desired speed and spread of rural development.

Agrarian reform as package of legislative measures concerning land reform has encompassed the first two elements of the agrarian relations in rural India. As a package of policy programmes for improving land and developing agriculture, it has also covered the last two elements in some form or other. That is why Ladejinsky said that agrarian reform is a combination of "favourable financial arrangements for land purposes; better methods of cultivation through technical assistance; land consolidation of fragmented holdings; adequate credit; cooperative marketing facilities; farm price schemes to stimulate agricultural production, and so forth".<sup>2</sup> The objective of agrarian reform as a package of legislative land reform measures is actually for restructuring the existing land relations so that the land is self-resumed for cultivation; the exploitative feudal or semi-feudal system of lord-peasant relations is liquidated; tenancy is abolished, surplus land is released



through ceiling on land holdings for distributing it among the landless; and the peasants - whether big or small - become landowners by themselves. The purpose of introducing agrarian/<sup>reform</sup> as a package of policy programmes for land and agricultural development has been for changing the old production relations into the new ones so that the peasants become progressive with technical dynamism and entrepreneurship, enter into the arena of commodity production, and develop and establish marketing links with urban areas. In other words, the restructured land relations and emerging new production relations through the above reforms could shape the speed and spread of rural development such that no social and technological dichotomies exist between the peasants and manufacturers, agriculture and industry, and town and countryside in the country.

### III.

Let us now begin with the State sponsored legislative measures of land reform in post-Independent rural India. The impact of these measures on the given land and production relations will be taken up for discussion in the latter sections of the paper.

Agrarian reform in India introduced by the State through a package of legislative land reform measures aimed at the following : abolition of intermediary land tenures; tenancy reforms comprising of rent regulations, security of tenures, confirmment of ownership rights on tenants; ceiling on land

holdings; and land consolidation of fragmented holdings. The Zamindari system which was a by-product of the British rule and covered 40 per cent of India was abolished by State legislation. In this way, 20 million cultivators were brought into direct contact with the State. This was one of the major successes achieved by the State in disintegrating the feudal structure of land relations in India.

"Getting rid of the zamindari system did not put an end to tenancy in India. Even in the ex-Zamindari areas, the home farms retained by the former middlemen continued to be operated by them. Above all, there were millions of tenants in the ryotwari areas where ownership proprietorship had long predominated."<sup>3</sup> There were millions of tenants bonded to the landlords having insecure land and they had no interests to improve the land for development purposes.

Therefore, the following principal measures of tenancy reform were adopted by the State through the enactment of Tenancy Acts in rural India : (a) rent should not exceed the level of one-fifth to one-fourth of the gross produce; (b) tenants should be accorded permanent rights in lands they cultivate subject to a limited right of resumption granted to landowners; and (c) in respect of non-resumable land, the landlord-tenant relationship should be ended by conferring ownership rights on tenants. The purpose of these measures was three-fold : granting freedom to tenants from the exploitative clutch



of the landlords; to discourage 'absentee landlordism'; and to encourage 'personal cultivation'. In other words, the self-resumption of land for cultivation and disintegration of feudal structure of personal bondage which are supposed to be important for changing the existing land relations were the main objectives underlying behind the enactment of Tenancy Acts in the country.

Despite various built-in legal loopholes and other institutional bottlenecks to their implementation, some progress was made in the field of tenancy reform. Table 1 shows that 3.43 million tenants were conferred ownership rights in land of 7.71 million acres. "The number of tenants on whom ownership rights were conferred, constituted 3.4 per cent of the total

Table 1  
Confirment of Ownership Rights on  
Tenants

States	No. of Tenants (in 000's)	Ownership Rights in Land (000's Acres)
1. Gujarat	462	1408
2. Madhya Pradesh	420	N.A.
3. Maharashtra	740	2138
4. Punjab	22	147
5. Rajasthan	199	944
6. Uttar Pradesh	1500	2000
7. Telengana (A.P.)	33	202
8. West Bengal	N.A.	808
9. Delhi	29	39
10. Himachal Pradesh	27	28
11. Tripura	10	12

Source : Planning Commission, Fourth Plan, p.176.

working force of rural population. The area brought under possession of tenants per head was a little more than 2 acres."<sup>4</sup> Some considerable progress was made in the States of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. In spite of these efforts, the number of tenant households continued to be about one-fifth of the total cultivating households. In some of the States like Bihar, Jammu & Kashmir, Mysore, West Bengal, Tripura, etc., the proportion of tenant households was reported to be much higher. It was estimated that the tenants and sub-tenants constituted more than 80 per cent of the total number of tenants, mainly in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

But since the early 1970's, somewhat different picture emerged from that of the early Sixties, so far the position and conditions of tenancy are concerned. In the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, the magnitude of tenancy is said to be negligible and the task of the Government to confirm ownership rights in land on the tenants seem to be on the verge of completion. In recent years, the CPM Government in West Bengal have made some quick progressive measures with success in the field of tenancy reform, despite facing difficulties of legislative-cum-administrative nature at the characteristic level of the State as such.

The current tenancy statistics of rural India may not necessarily tell the actual story about the number of tenants and the amount of area leased-in for cultivation under tenancy.



Its reasons may be numerous. But the fact is that many a number of the tenants and sub-tenants voluntarily surrendered their tenancy rights because of the practice of oral tenancy and 'dependency structure' created by the landowners for them in some form or other, specially during the post-New Technology era in developing rural India.

The third element of land reform policy, i.e. ceiling on holdings was simultaneously put into action in rural India. All the States made legislative efforts to fix the level of ceiling on land holdings but on the basis of different criteria suited to them. As a result, the levels of ceiling on land widely varied from one State to another. In Andhra Pradesh, it varied from 27 acres to 324 acres; in Gujarat from 19 acres to 216 acres, in Rajasthan from 22 acres to 336 acres; in Mysore from 27 acres to 216 acres; in Maharashtra from 78 acres to 126 acres; in Orissa from 20 acres to 80 acres; in U.P. from 40 acres to 80 acres; in certain parts of Punjab-Haryana from 30 acres to 40 acres and in Kerala from 12 acres to 15 acres. Ceiling levels of this magnitude were by themselves a deterrent to the success of land reform measure, the application of dual standard apart. As a result, there was very little land to distribute. Between the early sixties and the end of 1970, the States of Bihar, Mysore and Orissa had no land for distribution. In brief, for the country as a whole by the end of 1972 the declared surplus was only 2 million acres and less than half of that land was

distributed. Considering the tardy and spordic progress made by the States in the field of land ceiling imposition and implementation, they were directed by the Centre for removing the loopholes in their Ceiling Acts and for tightening the process of implementation in rural areas. Despite such efforts, the progress of taking over and distribution of ceiling surplus land had been tardy. Out of about 15.74 lakh hectares declared surplus in different states, as in March 1980 only 9.56 lakh hectares were taken possession of by the States and about 6.79 lakh hectares are distributed. This has benefited 11.54 lakh landless persons of whom 6.13 lakh beneficiaries belong to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Besides, 2.1 million acres of Government waste land is also distributed in 1975-78.

The under-marked and tardy progress of land reform relating to the enforcement of ceiling law is attributed to a number of factors. The Task Force set up by the Planning Commission in 1972 mentioned that lack of political will to implement the legislative measures by administrative machinery; the passiveness of poor peasants, tenants and landless labour to press the Government from below for distributive justice; and deliberately built-in legal flaws of the measures were responsible for the tardy progress of land reform. The absence of land records further added a good deal of confusion. The Task Force was of the opinion that the lack of financial support plagued the reform act from the beginning.

The contemporary debate on the concept of 'economic holding' also marred the future prospects of this reform, although it has



its own operational policy significance in the field of agricultural development. However, one cannot deny that the enforcement of ceiling law created a number of marginal and small self-employed farms and sustained the sentiments of 'land-hunger' among rural people in the agrarian society of India.

The land consolidation of fragmented holdings is taken to be another element of agrarian reform in India. "At first glance, fragmentation and land consolidation lie outside immediate land reform considerations. Yet, where fragmentation affects so adversely all the cultivators of India, including tenants, it becomes legitimate subject of agrarian reform in its broad sense. Most of the operating farms in India are small, but the difficulty of working them is greatly accentuated by their fragmentation to a point that, in the expression of a farmer, the earth is crubling under our feet."<sup>5</sup> Hence the programme for land holding consolidation was launched by all the states of India. The implementation process of this programme also faced a lot of legal and other institutional problems at the grass-root level. However, it also went along with some progress. It is estimated that by now nearly 45 million hectares of land, i.e. about one-fourth of the consolidable land, has been consolidated. Only in Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh the work is reported to be completed.

## IV

Let us look at the changes in the structure of land relations as a result of the land and tenancy reforms introduced in rural India. The foregoing section shows how these reforms broke and demolish the British make of the feudal structure of Lord-peasant relations and how they also lead to peasant proprietorship along with the possible growth of self-employed marginal and small farms in rural India.

Table 2  
Distribution of Operated Area

Size Class of Operational Holdings	Percentage of Households		Percentage of Operated Area	
	1954-55	1971-72	1954-55	1971-72
Landless	10.81	27.38	-	-
Poor Peasants (Upto 2.49 acres)	45.25	32.88	5.93	9.25
Small Peasants (2.50 - 9.99 Acres)	29.84	29.50	29.74	37.55
Large Farmers (10 acres & Above)	14.10	10.24	64.28	53.20

Table 2 presents the following characteristic features of change in the agrarian structure of land relations in rural India which occurred during 1954-55 to 1971-72. Firstly, there had been conversion of some of the poor peasant households into the landless category of households as the increase in the proportion of the latter with some increase in the proportion of their operated area from about 6 per cent to a little more than



9 per cent of the total operated and the increase in the proportion of landless rural households indicate. Secondly, some of the small households specially with upto 5 acres of holding seem to have been benefited by distribution of ceiling surplus land and their operated area stands to have increased from 30 per cent to 38 per cent of the total area, the households showing more or less the same proportion in both periods. Thirdly, the proportion of large farm households and the proportion of their operated area of the total operated area have decreased during 1954-55 to 1971-72.

So far the tenants and the magnitude of tenancy are concerned, there has been marked decline. Table shows declines in both the number of tenant holdings and leased-in area of the

Table 3  
Tenancy Variation Over Time

Period	Percentage of Holdings Reporting Leased-in Area	Leased-in Area as a Percentage of Total Operated Area
1950-51	-	35.70
1953-54	39.85	20.34
1961-62	23.52	10.70
1971-72	17.61	9.25

total operated area. However, there are wide inter-state variations in the magnitude of tenancy in rural India, as Table-4 indicates :

Table 4  
Tenancy Variations by States

States	Percentage of Leased-in	Percentage of Households Leased- in Area
Assam	17.0	33.2
Bihar	12.0	21.8
Manipur	29.5	29.3
Orissa	12.8	24.8
Himachal Pradesh	11.9	27.8
Uttar Pradesh	5.9	18.7
Madhya Pradesh	6.5	16.1
Rajasthan	6.8	14.1
Jammu & Kashmir	8.6	14.0
Haryana	21.7	21.6
Punjab	25.7	21.9
Karnataka	11.0	16.4
Tamil Nadu	10.8	17.3
Gujarat	3.4	13.0
Maharashtra	5.8	10.2
Andhra Pradesh	6.6	10.0
Kerala	5.8	10.1
India	9.5	17.6

There are only a few States where the proportion of their respective total area as leased-in area is less than 10 per cent. Punjab, Haryana, Manipur, Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka present more than 10 per cent of their respective operated areas as the magnitude of tenancy. There are various studies on tenancy relations - both micro as well as macro - which have observed two major trends of change in rural India. Firstly, the tenants are coming from the dominant class of farmers and secondly, they are also becoming progressive in character. However, there needs to make deeper investigation into the changing structure of land relations in India. But it



may not be denied that various legislative measures and programmes have eroded the feudal structure of land relations leading to self-cultivation of land by owners-cultivators by themselves. Moreover the present emerging agrarian situation has also led to tenancy as a worth-taking venture, particularly in the irrigated areas of rural India.

## V

The foregoing sections have briefly through light on the role of agrarian reform in restructuring the pattern of land relations that we had from the British rule on the eve of our independence. In this way, the land and peasant questions as the two elements of agrarian relations are considered. The above discussion show as to how agrarian reform affected the existing pattern of land relations by eroding the feudal structure of lord-peasant relations in land and how the peasants were legally granted private proprietorship. This was the first aspect of the peasant question, considered by the State in the shape of its agrarian reform. And the whole actions and efforts of the State also make us clear the perspectives of agrarian reform envisaged in the context of planning for rural development. But it will be more clear if the other two elements of agrarian relations, i.e., the question of agriculture and the social question of the relations between peasants and manufactures, town and countryside, and agriculture and industry are also analysed in relation to agrarian reform in India. For this, agrarian reform as a package of policy programmes for improving land and developing agriculture

should also be examined in details. But the time and space do not allow me to go into details and so the emerging production relations are taken into account for some brief discussion which may answer the questions raised in one of the foregoing sections.

If the official strategies of planning for rural development are looked at for making deeper investigation into them, in terms of Ranjit Sau<sup>6</sup> they may be grouped as the 'integral' and 'differential' strategies. He has included land reform, cooperative farming and community development under the first category; and the new agricultural strategy, special policy and programmes for developing and improving the productive and socio-economic conditions of the poor peasants, tenants, landless labourers and artisans under the second category. In fact, the latter policy programmes have been taken by Ladejinsky as the second part of agrarian reform in India. Given the change in the existing agrarian social structure of land relations as emerged from various land reforms and tenancy measures introduced by the State during 1951-52 to 1964-65, the potentials for the genesis of commodity production were created as one of the requirements for the development of agriculture. However the existence of low level of productive forces, inappropriate institutional conditions to stimulate the development of productive forces, the absence of financial institutions and marketing societies and other techno-economic infrastructures restrict the speed and the tempo of rural development and the spread of its benefits among all the



sections of the population in rural India. Hence the post-1965 era of differential strategies experienced the spurt of new technology as a package of modern inputs and practices; development and expansion of financial and marketing institutions in rural areas; farm price schemes to encourage agricultural production; development of storage facilities in rural areas; and other various schemes of differential character to develop marginal and small farmers, to provide assets to the weaker sections of the people, to improve the socio-economic lot of rural artisans, to provide employment opportunities to landless agricultural and non-agricultural labourers, etc. As a result, two things happened; on the one hand, the productive forces grew and developed; and on the other, class of progressive well-to-do farmers emerged. Please see Table 5 for the development of productive forces.

Table 5  
Agricultural Inputs

	1950-51	1965-66	1975-76	1978-79
Per cent of net area irrigated	17.6	19.3	24.2	26.3
Fertilizers consumption per hectare of cropped area (in Kg)	0.5	5.1	17.4	29.4
Tractors per lakh hectares of gross cropped area	7	14	166	234
Oil engines per hectare of gross cropped area	62	295	1074	N.A.
Irrigation pumpsets with tube-wells per lakh hectares	16	126	1617	2308
Power consumption in KWh per thousand hectares of cropped area	1.5	12.2	50.0	76.9

Source : Omvedt ( 7 )

However, the development of productive forces varies from one region to another . and from one area to another within a region. There are certain regions like Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Western U.P., and Tamil Nadu where the development of productive forces has been quite high.

Correspondingly, there has also emerged a new class of progressive and well-to-do farmers which manifest changing form of production relations in Indian agriculture. Who are those farmers or peasants? They are mostly those who cultivate land holdings of 10 acres and above, possess credit-worthiness and technical dynamism and produce and control a major portion of agricultural output and marketable surplus. They cut across caste frontiers at the point of common economic interests that stand for enjoying and commanding economic power. However, they also continue to maintain their caste identity for political purposes or goals. Thus they enjoy power or influence in different types of local institutions that form the basic core of political power structure at the apex level of the State.<sup>7</sup>

The prevailing characteristics of land, labour, credit, input and commodity markets also bear a witness to this class farmers - called rich peasants or capitalist - who have monopolistic type of control over the supply of scarce productive assets and resources having technical dynamism<sup>1</sup> and credit worthiness; and produce surplus output for marketing purposes and intensify the scale of farm production by using modern inputs and



practices. On the contrary, the poor peasants having meagre resources use their family labour and also hire out their labour for earning wages for subsistence. Moreover, there is growing number of landless labourers who depend on the rich peasants for subsistence. The policy programmes of differential character for developing and improving the conditions of marginal, small and agricultural labour have not benefited them as per expectation rather they have sustained the self-employment and casual or attached nature of farming in agriculture.

The self-employment nature of work by the poor peasants on their small farms simply makes them satisfied with the status they enjoy as landowners in rural India; but finally they have to struggle for their subsistence and existence. Moreover, on the political side, the new institutions of the panchayat raj, different cooperatives and educational institutions, mahila mandals and other village development institutions, all helped the new class <sup>to</sup> maintain its hegemony in a new way over the increasingly proletarianised and restless majority.<sup>8</sup>

## VI

Let us conclude what we have observed. As a package of land and tenancy legislative measures, agrarian reform has succeeded in eroding the edifice of feudal peasant relations by restructuring the pattern of land relations in such a manner that the peasants were brought into direct contact with the State having private proprietary ownership for resuming self-cultivation.

This reform could not succeed in removing monopoly element of land ownership. Hence a larger number of marginal and small landowners, and landless labourers increased overtime.

Given this agrarian structure of land relations, agrarian reform as a package of policy programmes for land and agricultural development strengthened the socio-economic position of mostly those who possessed large farm size. Along with the prevailing political forces and conditions, they also enjoyed power and so they are the powerful class in all respects. Hence the prevailing production relations in today's rural India have led to the emergence of a class, called rich or capitalist or rural elites.

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The restructured prevailing land relations and the changing production relations form such agrarian relations that are matching with the process of rural development more in favour of the rural rich than in that of the poor. Hence agrarian reform needs a fresh look at the problem of how to shape the speed and spread of development in rural India.